[Violin-Making and Local Politics]

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Form A

Circumstances of Interview

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker Sara B. Wrenn Date March 27, 1939

Address 505 Elks Building, Portland, Oregon

Subject Violin-Making and Local Politics.

None and address of informant Frank E. Coulter 421 S. W. Second Ave., Portland, Oregon.

Date and time of interview March 24, 1939 A. M.

Place of interview Workshop of informant, 421 S. W. Second Ave., Portland

Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant

Chas. Olson, fellow-worker on Writers' Project.

Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you —

Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

Second floor of old building, reached by dark, dusty flight of stairs. Room some 20 by 30 feet, with windows opening on court. Floor of old, worn and uneven boards, and a rusty stove in the center of the room. Piled everywhere, on the floor, on shelves and tables and benches, is the material — old and new wood of every description — from which the informant makes his instruments. Scores of instruments, completed and in the making, hang against one wall. His work table or bench stands beneath the dusty, cobwebby windows. A motor-run whipsaw is in the center of the room, neither the whipsaw itself nor the band being protected. In one obscure corner is a stationery washbowl with running water. Cans of glue and varnish, used and unused, as well as other incidental materials, is 2 here, there and everywhere. What little floor space remains is filled with a nondescript assortment of chairs, doubtless for the use of the informant's many visitors and cronies. One of Portland's very old business blocks, the rest of the second floor being used by a printing establishment. Building is in the town's oldest business section, close to Chinatown.

Form B

Personal History of Informant

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker Sara B. Wrenn Date March 27, 1939

Address 505 Elks Building, Portland, Oregon.

Library of Congress

Subject Violin-making and Local Politics.

Name and address of informant Frank E. Coulter 421 S.W. Second Street, Portland, Oregon.

Information obtained should supply the following facts:

1. Ancestry

2. Place and date of birth

3. Family

4. Places lived in, with dates

5. Education, with dates

6. Occupations and accomplishments with dates

7. Special skills and interests

8. Community and religious activities

9. Description of informant

10. Other points gained in interview

1. Father, Samuel Coulter; mother, Rebecca Andrus Coulter. Stock: Scotch and Irish.

2. Marion, Ohio. April 16, 1862.

3. Wife, Ellen Louisa Kent Coulter; two daughters, Mrs. Inez Boskill, Dorothy Coulter.

4. Ohio, California and Oregon. In Oregon 50 years.

5. Public schools; 2 1/2 years denomination school, Woodridge, Calif. 1 year, Stanford University.

6. Minister, United Brethern Church. Maker of stringed instruments.

7. Especially interested in political and economic questions dealing with humanitarianism.

8. General community interests. No lodges or fraternal organizations. Member United Brethern Church.

9. Tall and slender, with smooth kindly face. Shabby clothes. Of the fanatic type.

10. Interested in the welfare of mankind, but with considerable ego attached.

Form C

Text of Interview (Unedited)

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker Sara B. Wrenn Date March 27, 1939

Address 505 Elks Building, Portland, Oregon.

Subject Violin-making and Local Politics

Name and address of informant Frank E. Coulter 421 S. W. Second Avenue, Portland, Oregon.

Text:

I've always been musical and a natural mechanic, so when I turned from preaching in the United Brethern Church, I looked about and it struck me that, since there seemed to be so much racketeering in the business world, the best thing I could do was to develop the very finest stringed musical instruments that could be made. Of course that meant first, the violin. The tone of the violin has always been high-pitched. What I wanted to do was to develop an instrument of powerful tones. Along about 1910 an immense change in the world of music began to be noticeable. It was then the standard pitch began to go down. There was a firm in Chicago doing a half million dollars worth of business that now does about three or four thousand. The fall in the use of violins was terrible. There were some teachers here then, a man and his wife, who had about 600 pupils and about 40 teachers in their institution. They dropped to him and her and ten teachers. Then they went to Hollywood.

With the advent of the radio, music changed. The high soprano voice and the high-pitched instruments, like the mandolin and the banjo, are no good 2 on the radio. You never hear the shrill-voiced old Italian violin any more. The most popular instruments today are the saxophone and the double-bass viol.

There's no good or bad wood in making musical instruments. Any wood is all right. It's the way you use it. It is all nonsense, that talk of special wood from Europe. Appearance now counts for a lot, too. I won $450 once an a wager. I was to make three violins, one of standard material, one from a dry-goods box- - Ontario tamarack — and the third from a camphorwood chest. The judges were to listen to each of them being played in the dark, and if they could notice any difference — know when the violins were changed — I won the bet. They couldn't detect any difference in the tone of those three violins, and they bought them for $150.00 each. That was the wager. But not one of the three but what was made different from the other, so as to allow for the relative stiffness of the wood.

Now take the guitar. I was up in Canada for two or three years, and when I came back in 1911 the guitar was most in favor. I went to work to make the finest guitar possible. In it I used crossed veneer for strength and resonance. It took the first prize at the New York Exposition, and I sold then to all the big factories. I used yellow fir with white for brilliant tone, and California redwood, with rosewood and Australian lacewood for the top. The father of the lacewood tree is said to be the oak, and its mother, the mahogany.

Freak instruments aren't as popular as they were years ago. Once there, was a young man here in vaudeville at the old Marquam theater. He was a genius, who appeared under the name of Motzarto. The program showed a solo by him on a one-stringed violin. It was really a cello. He wanted to know if I couldn't make him a real one-string violin. I did and he took it with him to Europe, and brought it back with him to Cincinnati, his native city. He died not long after he returned from Europe, and the City of Cincinnati today has that little one-string fiddle in its museum.

3

Violin players sometimes lose what is known as their “tone” ear for getting the major scale. I worked out a plan for a player who suffered that loss by placing frets, tiny cross pieces of inset steel on the finger board. He used that for two years.

It was in 1906 that I took an order for a German zither. That was for vaudeville too. They wanted the zither on legs, with a solo slide overstrung scale 1 1/2 inches longer than the regular. There wasn't any such fingerboard in existence. The Philadelphia firm I wrote to said no such a thing could be made in tune. Well, I got my old calculus out — I never was very good at mathematics at best — and I sweat blood trying to get the differential for a semi-tone, and finally I worked it out. As a matter of fact I found the formula in an old [Harper's Magazine,?] under the section of the “Editor's Easy Chair.” After I got the formula, I had to make the tool, and here it is. It is what I call a proportional divider. It is made of steel, with the longer arm 11 inches from the exact center of the pivot to the extreme and of the point; the short arm is one inch, to give 1/18. The formula for semi-tone

in a musical instrument is that each semi-tone be 1/18 and 3/1000 less than the preceding one. Spreading these two arms keeps the exact proportion of the semi-tone.

Here's something else I'm doing to produce the depth of sound now wanted. On guitars I place the sound-holes on the edge of the face to aid in giving volume. And here's a mandolin with a rounded back, that I turned by hand to produce the “roll” in playing. I took this instrument out to a mandolin-player friend of mine in the hospital, when it was finished. His eyes just lighted up when he saw it. He played that mandolin the last thing he did, then he put it on the pillow beside him, so they told me, and went to sleep forever.

There was a violin player here in Portland about 1912 that was a natural. He was an Italian hunchback, nineteen years old and only about four feet tall.

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I used to listen to him. He didn't have a decent violin — a three-quarter, no tone affair, and his arms were too twisted to handle it properly, so I modeled a violin for him, making it so that without shortening the scale he could make the reach. I brought him down to my shop and I said, “Guiseppe, here's a violin for you.” (His name was Guiseppe Amato.) He took the fiddle without a word, only his big, wistful eyes shining, and he went to a corner of the shop; and there he played, without stopping, for more than an hour. He played out his very soul. He made that violin wail and laugh, while the tears ran down his cheeks. He just couldn't believe it was for him. He had to go and get his father because he was afraid his father might think it was a game to make him pay money for the violin. I forgot to say the boy played on the street. It was just three days later, and he was playing on Ben Selling's corner — I think it was Fourth and Morrison — and Ben Selling came out to listen to the boy. I said to Ben, “Ben don't you think its a shame such genius as that hasn't a chance to develop.” Ben answered, “Will, what do you think?” I said, “Well if I was Ben Selling, and I had as much money as he's got, I'd srnd that boy to Italy to study.” Ben laughed. But just one week later that boy was started on his way to Genoa. He studied hard, but he wasn't

very strong, and he only lived four years after that. The world lost a great musician in his death.

Once when Fritz Kreisler was playing here, he dropped in to see me. He had his Stradivarius, valued at $25,000 with him. There was some little thing he wanted done on the violin, nothing of great importance. I said to him, “Sit down, and let me finish this while you're here. I don't want the responsibility of keeping this.” So he waited. He is a friendly sort. His concert was due two days later, and on that evening I want up to Graves Music Store, on Sixth street, about six-thirty o'clock. And there in the window was the old Strad. I thought that was funny, so I waited around till ten o'clock that night, and that old Strad was still there in the store window. I saw Mr. 5 Kreisler after the concert, and I said to him, “Mr. Kreisler, do you always give your old fiddle absent treatment?” And I told him about seeing it in Graves' window. Kreisler looked kind of sheepish, as he laughed and said, “That damned fiddle, I forget him.” He actually used a new violin he got in Montreal.

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Now, I'm going to tell you some stories of Oregon laws. This one is about the Initiative and Referendum. Away back in 1885, there was a man running a newspaper in Albany, Oregon, named John W. Roark. He was a strong believer in real democracy; that the people of a democracy should do things directly. He had a good, strong voice and was a pretty good orator. So he sold his paper, bought a wagon and a pair of cayuses, and with his wife and two children started out to convert the State. For the next four years he visited every section of Oregon, preaching the gospel of direct primaries, and for the peoples' control. It was a political question for both parties. Then a man named Nelson, a painter in Portland, became a zealot in behalf of the measure. Once when the two political parties each had their convention in Salem at the same time, he played one against the other. He made them believe that each had to beat the other to it. Finally Roark, Nelson and Mrs. (Henderson) Lewelling, got together and formulated a law that they introduced to the legislature. That was when U'ren stopped into the picture. Later, when submitted to the

people, the measure carried and became a law. But it was Roark, who died in 1891, who may truthfully be said to be the father of Oregon's Initiative and Referendum Act.

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Now as to the Parole Law. Judge Henry McGinn (on the circuit bench of Oregon from 1910 to 1916), was a warm personal friend of mine. Whenever he was 6 disturbed over some question he would come in here and talk it over. Sometimes he would get so excited he would jump up, prance around the room and shed half his clothes; while he cussed and slapped his hands together. He had a great habit of slapping his hands. In 1909 there was an old gentleman and his wife in Portland, named Henderson. They had two sons in Alaska, and one of the boys came home, bringing gold dust to the amount of $700.00, which he turned over to his father to pay off a mortgage for that sum on their home. As the old man was going down town to pay the mortgage he was robbed by a young fellow with a gun. Well, the money was gone, he couldn't get in touch with his sons, and it looked like the old folks were going to lose their home after all. But the very next day, after the robbery, a prostitute in the old Paris House, at 4th and Couch streets, called the Police Department and reported that a young fellow, drunk and with a lot of money was at her place, and for the police to come and get him. The police got him all right, but he only had a little of the money left. Three weeks later the young robber went to trial. When Henry came in then he had the worst spasm of all. He raved and swore. The boy was going to prove guilty and there was nothing to do but send him to the penitentiary. But what good was that going to do anybody? It wouldn't save the old people's home, and it would probably mean the boy's eternal ruination. I took my apron off and sat down facing the judge. “Now, Judge,” I said, “haven't I read somewhere that a circuit judge can make the law? If that's the cases if I were you, I'd make a little law. Give the boy the limit, and hold the commitment over him till he pays that money back; and then tear the commitment up.” The Judge cussed something awful. “There ain't no law for that,” he yelled. “To hell with the law,” [sez?] I. “Yes,” sez he, “You'd have the guts to do it, law or no law.” Well, the case went before the judge; the prosecuting attorney did his stunt, and the lawyer for the

defense put in a plea of guilty. I can hear McGinn snort now, as he delivered sentence, which in effect was: “You can't escape that way. That was a cold-blooded robbery 7 that deserves the limit of a 25-year sentence to the penitentiary.” The court was aghast. Then the Judge continued, “Your going to the penitentiary won't help these old people to keep their home. But with that sentence hanging over you you can undertake payments on the mortgage so as to stop foreclosure proceedings, and you can keep on doing that until the mortgage release is in my hands.” At that the father of the boy spoke up and said he could raise the money right away if they'd let his boy off. But the Judge held that by doing that the boy wasn't being punished at all; his father was. Finally he made the decision that if the boy would make restitution to his father, it could be managed that way. So the father paid the mortgage, and the boy paid his father a little at a time, and when he got it all paid the judge tore the commitment up. That started the parole law, the passage of which was forced through the very next session of the state legislature.

Form D

Extra Comment

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Comment:

Mr. Coulter proved an almost perfect informant, very generously giving the interviewer more than two hours' time, and patiently explaining and showing his various instruments and the improvements he has worked out.